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TITLE: The Pitfall Of A Latin Quirk

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Recurrent problem for the analyst who follows south-of-the-border restlessness.

THE PITFALL OF A LATIN QUIRK

M. E. O. Gravalos

A problem of interpretation recurs from time to time in current intelligence on Latin America. The set-piece situation is created by spot reports of statements from a Latin national "in a position to know" to the effect that events in his country have passed into a critical stage. Of unimpeachable authenticity and alarming content, these reports are immediately disseminated in raw form at the cabinet or presidential level. At the same time, fill-in and assessment are urgently demanded of the area specialist. The analyst whose expertise is primarily Latin American is thus brought into contact with the higher levels of current intelligence—men whose background tends to give them a particular familiarity with European and Sino-Soviet problems—and it is often extremely difficult for him to explain to them his grounds for recommending caution about accepting reports whose authenticity he does not question.

During the mid-1950's, for example, a series of cables were received from Bolivia reporting conversations among leaders of the anti-Marxist opposition to the government. The opposition leaders declared that their plans for violent overthrow of the government were well under way and told of the military, police, and civilian elements making up their revolutionary forces.

The men quoted were in fact leaders of the most important opposition group. The conversations reported were authentic. But no revolutionary attempt was made. Analysis of the situation revealed what the plotters also knew—that they hadn't a ghost of a chance. They had been indulging in audible daydreaming.

In Venezuela, some months after the overthrow of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, a new cabinet was installed. Several days later a report of undoubted authenticity was received recording a conversation held between a member of the

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A Latin Quirk

Venezuelan Communist Party's boss triumvirate and a Soviet citizen attached to the Soviet embassy in Mexico. (Venezuela had no Soviet embassy.) In the course of the conversation the Venezuelan Communist leader told the Soviet representative that three members of the new cabinet were dues-paying Communists.

Because of the strategic and domestic political importance of Venezuelan petroleum, events after the overthrow of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship had been followed in exceptional detail. One could not of course exclude the possibility that three cabinet members were sleepers, but the information available made it seem doubtful. Because the analyst had to admit the authenticity of the report, however, it was difficult for him to explain his reservations about its truth. In fact, as it turned out, the Venezuelan Communist had been grossly exaggerating his hopes into a boast before the Soviets.

More recently, an authentic report was received from a close associate of Brazilian Marshal Denys, whose anti-Goulart plotting had been under observation for some months. It said that the Marshal would move within a few days to overthrow the Goulart government by revolutionary action. The source of the report was unimpeachable; a plot against the government was known to be under way—and was of great intelligence interest because of Goulart's leftward trend; and the action was reported imminent. Nevertheless, the report was found inconsonant with other evidence. The fact was that the source was stating a hope as if it were a plan.

The Latin American tendency to express the most nebulous of ideas in an extremely positive fashion and describe dreams as if they were reality makes it difficult for the analyst himself to assess an unexpected report. He can never be sure immediately whether he has in a particular instance an example of this tendency.

The phenomenon would actually be easier to deal with in respect of making one's doubts understood if it happened more often. But the field reporters eliminate most occurrences by checking for additional information when there is time. This very fact leaves the analyst to encounter the problem almost exclusively under intense deadline pressure. He can only hope that those who have the last say in intelligence production will retain his due caution in putting out the report.

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